

Reading  
Passages

# On the Oregon Trail

## Oregon Fever

Men who got the urge to travel into the unsettled regions of the far west were often said to have "Oregon fever." Many farmers and families were pulled toward the Oregon territory and other western lands by the descriptions they heard or read about from people who lived there or had seen the land. The attraction of practically free land rumored to be fertile and easy to farm lured many farmers, especially those with large families.

While most emigrants to the west recognized the dangers involved in the travel, the draw of land was incredibly strong. Some families had already moved across Ohio, Kentucky, Kansas, Missouri, and other states looking for better land. These pioneer farmers had been unsuccessful in farming where they had settled or were attracted to the lure of better land further west.

## Economic Pressure

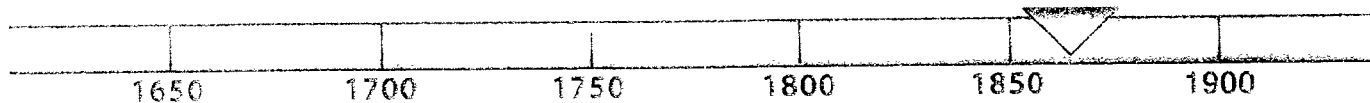
People traveled west for many reasons. Families often moved west because of economic circumstances. Squatters on land in some of the Midwestern territories had lost their land in legal disputes. Economic downturns, personal financial failures, debts owed to banks, rapidly rising land values (in states like Missouri), and the desire for a better life pushed families west. Some people just wanted to live in untamed lands away from laws and neighbors.

## Reluctant Travelers

Men were the most eager to move west and brave the dangers on the trail. Wives and children were often much more reluctant to leave their family, friends, and communities. Women were more realistic about the dangers they and their families might encounter. They recognized that they would never see their aging parents or relatives again, and they worried about what would happen to their children if they and their spouse both died. Moving west was not a decision to be made in a hurry.

## Pregnant Travelers

One out of every five women who traveled along the Oregon Trail was pregnant during some part of the journey. Giving birth along the route was more dangerous than at home. Most pregnant women worked every day on the trip right up to the time their babies were born. Sometimes the leaders would reluctantly stop for the day while a child was born. Sometimes the train went ahead, and the family had to catch up on their own. A pregnant woman got help from older women or other mothers during the delivery since there were no doctors.



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## On the Oregon Trail *(cont.)*

### The Route

On their journey west to Oregon, travelers “jumped off” from either Independence or St. Joseph, Missouri. From Independence they traveled the first 200 miles across the Great Plains to the Platte River, which they followed for the next 450 miles through what is now Nebraska and into Wyoming. Then they followed the Sweetwater River until it reached South Pass, the easiest route through the Rocky Mountains. West of the Rockies the trail followed a series of smaller rivers and streams until travelers reached the Snake River in Idaho.

Next the wagon trains climbed the rugged Blue Mountains on the eastern border of Oregon and followed the trail along the Columbia River for 200 miles until reaching The Dalles, where pioneers loaded their wagons onto rafts or Indian canoes.

Travelers then floated down the rapid and dangerous Columbia River, often losing all of their possessions at this final stage of the journey. After 1846 a wagon trail was used through the Cascade Mountains to the Willamette Valley. In both cases, however, the last leg of the journey was dangerous and often deadly.

### Cut-offs and Frozen Passes

Some wagon trains hired guides who knew the route. Usually these were mountain men or

adventurers who had traveled through the area before. Together the leaders and guides would choose the route to follow. Many wagon trains used guidebooks published by people who claimed to have traveled the routes, but these were frequently inaccurate.

Some wagon trains took cut-offs which were supposed to save days or weeks. Often these were much longer routes and cost travelers dearly in time and lives lost on waterless or dangerous trails.

### The Donner Party

The Donner Party was one group of travelers that took a cut-off recommended in a guidebook. It got them to the Sierra Nevada Mountain passes so late that they were snowed in, and 34 members died from starvation after all of the animals and even leather harnesses and belts were eaten.

A few members resorted to cannibalism and ate members of the group who had died. The survivors crossed the mountains in deep snow, having lost everything they owned but their lives.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Section: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Oregon Trail

1. What were people who traveled to the unsettled west said to have?
2. List 3 reasons that a family might move west.
3. What happened to the Donner party?
4. Roughly how long was the journey along the Oregon Trail?
5. What did travelers use as fuel in their camp fires?
6. At what time did wagon trains start off each morning?
7. What fraction of women who traveled along the Oregon Trail were pregnant at some point along the journey?
8. List 3 dangers that pioneers faced while traveling west.
9. Why did wagon trains elect leaders?
10. Who were usually hired to guide wagon trains west?
11. What were some jobs done by men on the journey west?
12. What were some jobs done by women on the journey west?
13. What were some jobs done by children on the journey west?
14. What events did pioneers use as excuses to celebrate while heading west?